CLIENT SYSTEM ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Setting the Stage: *The Important Role of the Social Work Profession*

Professional social workers are required to develop and practice ongoing social work knowledge, values and skills in order to be competent social workers. This is a career long commitment embracing both professional growth and personal growth. Our personal well being impacts the well being of the client systems we serve.

Yet, along with this commitment to continue to learn and grow, the social work professional needs to be able to handle ambiguity. The reality that many/most situations do not fit a neat package; but rather "people making it somehow day to day, hour to hour not without pain, struggle and suffering but with capabilities and resources that can be built upon and supported by our alliance with these possibilities." (Saleebey, 2013, p. 43)

Suppes and Wells call social work "a unique profession" and site three reasons:

- The dual focus of person and environment
- The strengths perspective in approaching the work, and
- Social workers own NASW Code of Ethics (2013, p. 4-5)

The author believes these three reasons are what contribute to social work having so much to offer in primary social work settings and in secondary settings where a social worker's presence is a complementation to the professional team. Secondary settings include medical, educational, geriatric, rehabilitation, criminal justice, substance abuse, mental health and a broad array of other settings.

Additionally the attention given to micro, mezzo and macro systems impacting the client system creates a lens that broadens understanding of the client situation. There is recognition of the influence of privilege, oppression and trauma history. There is value placed on being culturally sensitive as one embraces diversity in the client systems social workers serve.

Thus all these components are combined and incorporated as social workers serve client systems each day in a variety of settings with the rich diversity of clients. This compliments other disciplines and offers a unique contribution to professional settings and client systems.

Intervention Models: *Systematic Interview Steps*

As social workers focus on person in environment it is useful to relook at intervention models used in practice. For the purpose of this paper, three different intervention models will be named, with one model being highlighted.

    1. Compton and Galaway feature Phases of the *Problem-Solving Model*:

        Phase I - Contact or Engagement Phase

        Phase II - Contract Phase, including assessment

        Phase III - Action Phase, including evaluation   (1989, p. 389-391)

    2. Johnson features the Stages of the *Problem-Solving Process*:

        Stage 1 - Preliminary statement of the problem

        Stage 2 - Statement of preliminary assumptions about the nature of the problem

        Stage 3 - Selection and collection of information

        Stage 4 - Analysis of information available

        Stage 5 - Development of a plan

        Stage 6 - Implementation of the plan

        Stage 7 - Evaluation of the plan   (1992, p. 55)

    3. The Intervention Process Model used by Eastern Mennonite University's social work program is the Sheafor, Horejsi, and Horejsi *Planned Change Process* which has five phases:
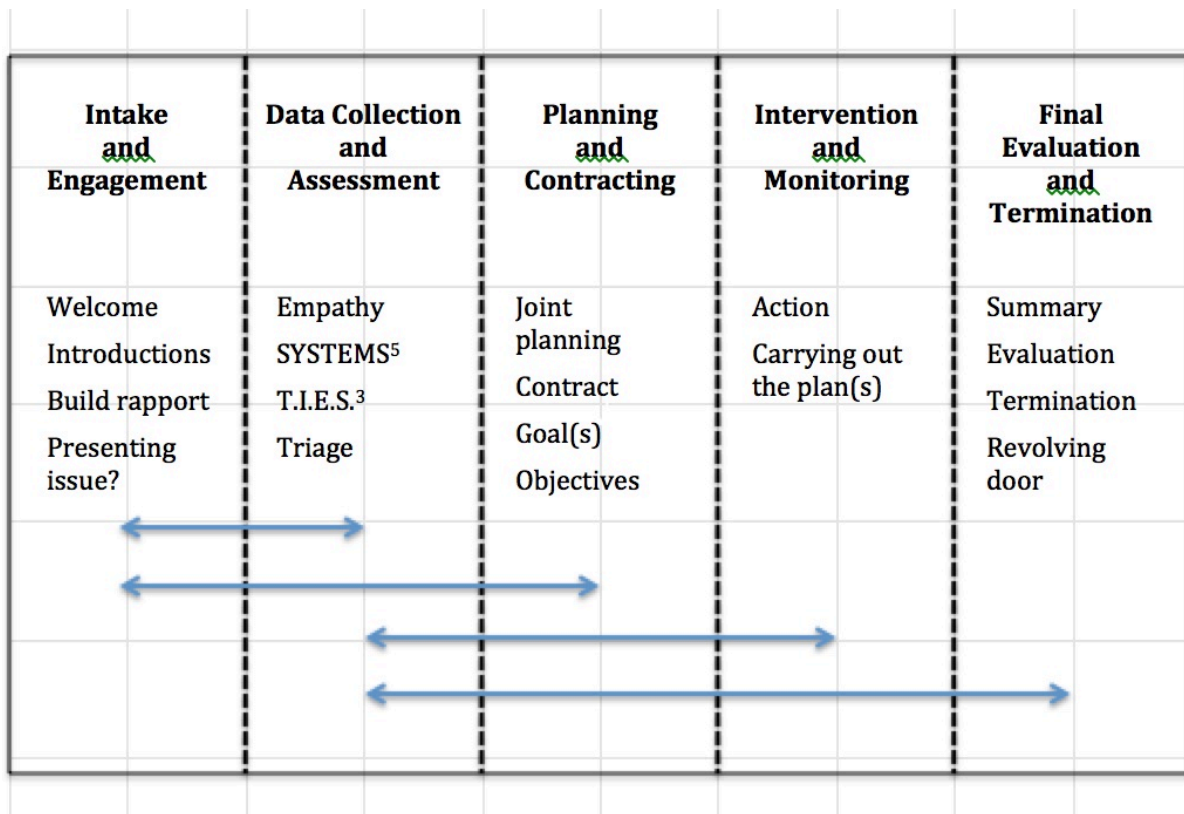
        Phase I - Intake and Engagement

        Phase II - Data Collection and Assessment

        Phase III - Planning and Contracting

        Phase IV - Intervention and Monitoring

        Phase V - Termination and Evaluation (2000, p. 126-127)

Intake and Engagement	Data Collection and Assessment	Planning and Contracting	Intervention and Monitoring	Final Evaluation and Termination
Welcome	Empathy	Joint planning	Action	Summary
Introductions	SYSTEMS[5]	Contract	Carrying out the plan(s)	Evaluation
Build rapport	T.I.E.S.[3]	Goal(s)		Termination
Presenting issue?	Triage	Objectives		Revolving door

Sheafor, Horejsi, and Horejsi / Wenger Clemens

This is the five-phase intervention model, which will be referred to for this paper, specifically looking at Phase II - Data Collection and Assessment.

Client System Assessment: *Essential Skill for Practice*

Client system assessment is one skill social workers use during interventions with clients systems throughout the intervention process. The models named create a systematic method for problem-solving or processing client issues. This paper is focusing on the assessment component.

Social workers are aware that micro, mezzo and macro levels impact client systems. In fact one definition of Social Systems Theory is the interconnectedness of the person and environment on the micro, mezzo and macro levels.

In generalist social work practice client system assessment is an ongoing social work skill used with all intervention levels and throughout the client intervention process. Suppes and Wells name five *"levels of intervention"* the individual, family, group, organization and community levels (2013).

University students and social work practitioners face the challenge of taking an abstract concept, the "art" of social work as such, and combining it with evidence-based practice skills

which need to prioritize and address issues, the "science" of social work as assessment strategies are utilized.

Shulman suggests there are underlying assumptions for the social work practitioner when doing an assessment: people and their environment are interrelated, people face barriers from other people or systems and the social worker must always reach for strengths in people and systems. (1992)

Vaughn, Howard and Thyer in their work on evidenced-based social work state: "The past century has witnessed the remarkable growth of practice-relevant scientific research and there are clear indications that this impressive growth will continue or accelerate for the foreseeable future." (2009, p. 7)

Components of Assessment: *The challenge of "meeting the client where they are at"*

How does the social worker effectively "meet the client where they are at" when assessing data collected from the client system?

Shulman reminds practitioners to use empathy in the assessment phase. Social workers need to tune in to the client's sense of urgency and to use one's senses to fully embrace all the client is feeling and experiencing. (1992)

Chang and Scott express the need for the social worker to be genuine and to explore the meaning of the client's words and body language. (1999)

Sidell and Smiley reinforce the importance of nonverbal behavior in assessment: posture, facial expression, body position and so on. (2008)
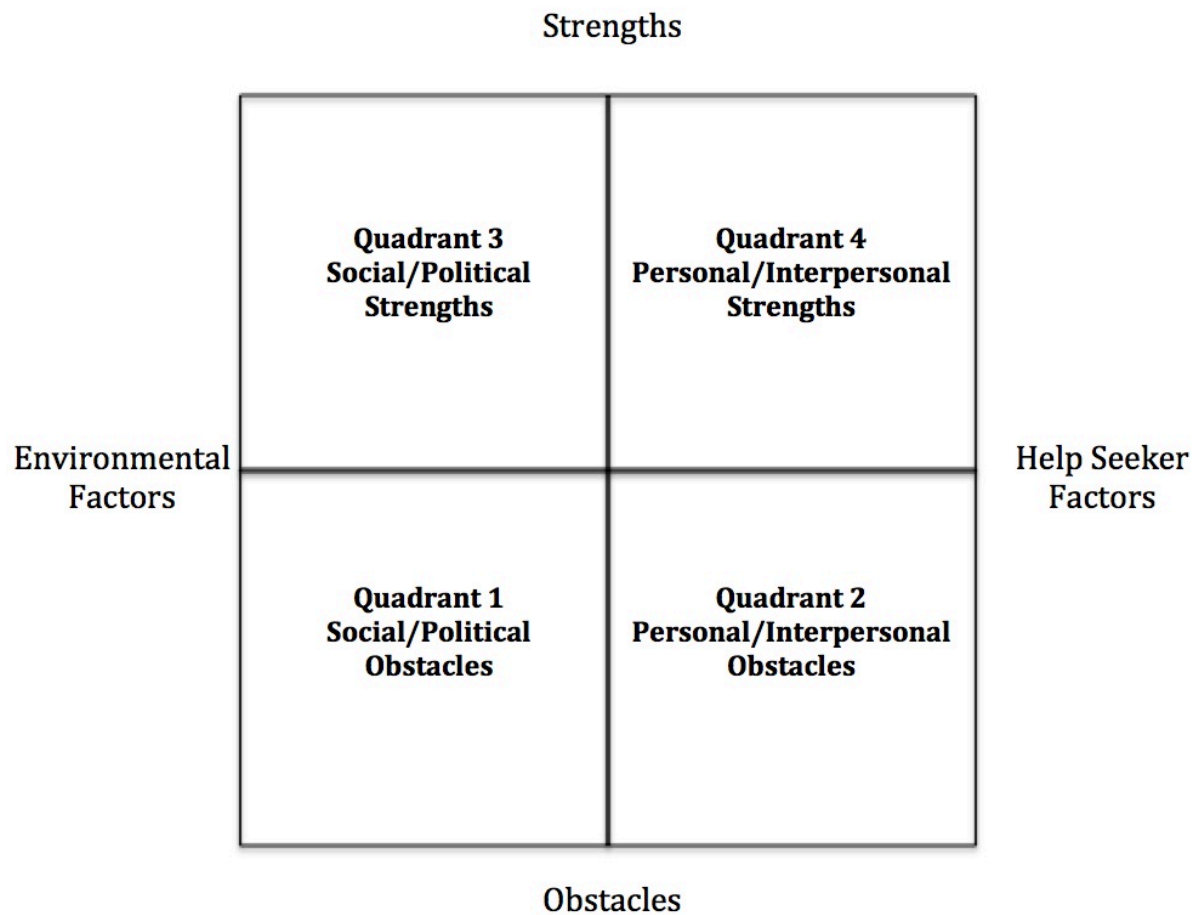
Rothman reminds the practitioner to be mindful of the vulnerability of the client. (1999)

Dillard and Reilly indicate continual assessment occurs throughout the interview process. It involves not only the client but the worker as well with questions like: Is this approach working? How well did I correct that mistake? Or, Am I making a connection with the client system? (1988).

Kadushin suggests, asking the client if there is anything else that might be helpful, is a collaborative effort acting on the worth and dignity of all people, one of social work's central values. (1983).

"Spiritual assessment is defined as an existential relationship with God or a perceived transcendence". (Hodge & Holtrop, 2012, p. 257) and this can be another component of assessment when the client has raised the issue.

Saleebey has created four quadrants when thinking about systematically looking at assessment:

Strengths

Quadrant 3 **Social/Political** **Strengths**	**Quadrant 4** **Personal/Interpersonal** **Strengths**
Quadrant 1 **Social/Political** **Obstacles**	**Quadrant 2** **Personal/Interpersonal** **Obstacles**

Environmental Factors ← → Help Seeker Factors

Obstacles

(Saleebey, 2013, p. 194)

The Council on Social Work Education has created ten core competencies and forty-one practice skills for acquisition by all social workers who graduate from an accredited social work program. (EPAS 2008).

Core Competency 10: Engages, assesses, intervenes, and evaluates generalist social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.
Assessment
    10b.1 Collects, organizes, and *interprets* client data;
    10b.2 Identifies and assesses client strengths, limitations, and context;
    10b.3 Develops mutually agreed-upon intervention goals and objectives; and
    10b.4 Selects appropriate intervention strategies.
This mandate is another reason to keep looking at assessment literature and finding tools for assessment strategies.

Sensitivity to Diversity and Assessment: *Openness to difference and ongoing learning*

Assessment with diversity also involves extra care around identity formation, intergenerational issues, cultural conflicts and socioenvironmental impacts.

Clients such as refugees and immigrants have major transitions including trauma, language and cultural barriers, documentation issues, acculturation, isolation, added challenges with parenting, employment and education for both adults and children.

Social workers need to emphasize strengths even in the midst of challenges. Strengths include: ethnic group solidarity, pride, hard work, endurance, perseverance and the inclusion of spirituality. (Lum, 2011)

The worker who is comfortable with their own race, culture, and ethnicity, is the worker who can better try to understand that of another.

McAuliffe and Associates lists requirements for being a culturally alert counselor or social worker: awareness of one's own cultural values and biases, knowledge of clients' worldviews, having interventions strategies and culturally alert skills. (2008, p 34-42)

Congress' Culturagram (2013) is recommended by this author for use with immigrants, migrants, refugees and all others facing acculturation issues. Listed are related questions useful in understanding someone new to the dominant culture in the U.S.A. It is vital to make no assumptions and be curious and open to respectfully learn and honor differences.

Culture is defined as learned beliefs and behaviors that are shared by a group. Culturally sensitive social workers need to have the goal of making no assumptions when working with diverse client systems.

Suggested questions to be used with Congress' Culturagram:

The following are suggested questions to be used by a social worker, as appropriate:

1. What brought you to the United States? Tell me about the reason you left your country? (substitute name of country of origin, if known) Have you been abused/hurt? Have you seen others get hurt? Were you ever in a refugee camp?
2. How long have you lived in the United States? In this community?
3. How old were you when you came to the United States?
4. Do you have a green card? There are agencies that can help you go through the process of getting a green card (if applicable).
5. What language do you speak at home? In the community? How are you managing when you interact in the (English) speaking community?
6. What clubs or groups or, religious or Faith community do you belong to? (Learn about rival groups, or differences within a cultural group, as appropriate)

7. When you are sick what do you do? Who helps you? (Be sensitive to a variety of gender issues around privacy and modesty) What do you think contributes to a person not feeling well?
8. What kinds of family parties/celebrations do you have? What are some of the holidays you celebrate?
9. What events have been stressful for you or your family?
10. Do you believe everyone should have a high school education? What do you think about college education? (Client could have a doctorate and/or a professional training.)
11. Help me understand the role of a woman and the role of a man in your family. Who in the family earns the money to support the family? Who lives in your house?
12. What is important to you? What else do you want to tell me?

Assessment Models: *Assessment Guides – Social Worker Checklists*

As mentioned this paper specifically looks at the "Data Collection and Assessment" phase of the intervention process. The author has created two assessment tools, which can be used as a checklist for generalist social work practitioners. These models have a systematic process for the social worker to use for assessment purposes, affording clarity regarding priorities and direction when working with a client system.

The first assessment tool is called "Systems^5". In this tool the social worker is given five different items that the social worker can use as a checklist in the data collection and assessment phase. The name "Systems" is used because Social Systems Theory is a foundational orienting theory for social work practitioners. In "The Social Work Dictionary" Robert Barker defines *general systems theory* as "A conceptual orientation that attempts to explain holistically the behavior of people and societies by identifying the interaction components of the system and the controls that keep these components (subsystems) stable and in a state of equilibrium. I therefore concluded that the heading Systems was an appropriate term to use in a client assessment model. The "5" emerges from the five points to prioritize when working with a client system in the "System^5" client assessment tool.

1. **S**ituation?	What brings the client(s) for services today? Who makes up the client system?
2. **S**afety?	Determine if safety is an issue for the client system. Immediately provide resources, support and assistance if safety is an issue.
3. **S**urvival Needs/Other Needs?	Are basic needs being met for the client system? What are other issues to be addressed?
4. **S**upports/Strengths?	What supports are in place? What strengths does the client system bring to this process? How were challenges dealt with previously? What resources are needed?
5. **S**hort-term or Crisis Work?	Which treatment modality is appropriate with this client system today? How imminent and immediate is the need? Is there time for an ongoing process?

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When a social work is truly present with the client, the social worker can listen to what **S**ituation brought the client at this time, or what is the "presenting issue" as defined by the client? Then, as appropriate, the **S**afety of the client system needs to be assessed. **S**urvival and other needs are monitored and the **S**upports and strengths of the client system are explored and honored. Both the informal and formal supports and strengths the client system has in place are seen as important assets. Lastly a determination is made if the focus demands **S**hort-term work or crisis work as far as the intervention process. How imminent and immediate is the need?

T.I.E.S.[3]   *Assessment Guide - Social Worker Checklist*

The second tool the author developed is called T.I.E.S.[3] and it is also a checklist for the social worker when doing data collection and assessment work. This checklist works in conjunction with Systems[5]. T.I.E.S.[3] is used to acquire more data and to put the information in an appropriate context for this unique client system's situation. T.I.E.S seemed like a suitable heading because professional social workers recognize that everything that is happening with the client system is tied together and one item impacts others. The "3" represents that there are three "S"s used in the model. Questions are provided with the T.I.E.S. model after each heading, followed by a chart listing additional categories, as useful, to be used with the T.I.E.S.[3] assessment tool.

T.I.E.S.[3]   *Assessment Guide - Social Worker Checklist*

1. **T**ransitions and Developmental Stages for the client system

   Consider transitional issues and specific developmental needs/stages. Regarding immigrants and refugees, what additional transitions had a significant impact in their own situation?

2. **I**nterpersonal Areas for the client system

   Who are the significant persons for this client system?

   What kind of informal and formal support is available at this time?

3. **E**nvironmental Systems   (Think Eco-Map)

   What are significant factors in the client system's daily routines?

   What are accessible resources? What factors contribute to barriers?

   Is the client systems' environment supportive or hostile?

4. **S**ocietal Context

   Acknowledge societal realities and social policies and how they affect the client system: cultural, socioeconomics, race/ethnicity, political climate, socialization, discrimination and oppression?

   What advocacy issues emerge and/or what organizing is appropriate regarding this client system and the issues at hand? How can social justice issues be addressed?

5. **S**pecial Considerations

   What makes this situation unique: language, disability, grief and loss, literacy, trauma, immigration, homelessness, other challenges?

   What unique strengths are present? What ethical issues are relevant?

6. **S**pirituality

   What beliefs, values, and/or rituals have meaning for this client system?

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Transitions & Developmental Stages	Interpersonal Areas	Environmental Systems	Special Considerations	Social Context	Spirituality
Infant	Family	Home	Language	Socioeconomic Status	Perceptions
Preschool	Family Structure	Neighborhood	Mobility	Color	Values
Childhood	Children	Employment	Psychiatric Diagnosis	Race	Beliefs
Latency	Peers	School	Medical Challenges	Ethnicity	Feelings
Adolescence	Friends	Health Care	Alzheimer's	National Origin	Religious Creed
Young Adulthood	Partners	Mental Health Services	Mental/Learning/Physical Disability	Age	Individual Understandings
Seniors	Significant Others	Sheltered Workshop	Grief/Loss Issues	Class	Support
	Co-workers	Access to Services	Depression	Gender	Freedom
Transitions:	Neighbors	Violence	Trauma	Culture	Access
School/Jobs	Faith Community	Safety	Discrimination	Sex	Societal Validation
Retirement	Social Network	Government & Other Programs	Literacy	Retained Origin Identity	Morals
Marital Status	Pets	Transportation	Sexual Orientation	Political Climate	Personal Definition
Divorce	Virtual relationships	Place of Worship	Gender Identity	Lifestyle	Rituals
Relationships				Socialization	Holidays
Children				Acculturation	Celebrations
Death/Loss				Prejudice	Transcendent meaning and help
Move				Roles	

Summary: *Competent, compassionate and strength-based social workers*

When using the Systems[5] and TIES[3] social work assessment tools, social workers create a client-centered, thorough, strength-based and culturally sensitive partnership. This assessment strategy strengthens the client worker relationship.

There is usefulness in having a systematic checklist that keeps data collection and assessment prioritized on the micro, mezzo and macro levels.

Yet, it is essential to remember, "The best questions are those which rise organically and almost spontaneously out of what the interviewee is saying. The interaction is responsive." (Kadushin, 1983, p.233)

In the midst of working with the client system never underestimate the significance of warmth, respect, empathy and genuineness in the helping process.

The social worker needs to understand a variety of worldviews, needs to appreciate the significance of oppression and trauma, needs to remain strength-based and empowering. (Scales & Kelly, 2012)

Assessment is not interpretation. Self-determination alone dictates the client has choices and the power to make decisions, unless there is a safety issue regarding self or others. Quality assessment also helps clarify what is important for this particular client system.

And lastly, if the over-all goal of social work is to work for social justice, then assessment at its best becomes a political activity. "If the social work professional takes seriously the mandate of working toward social and economic justice, assessment must also include honestly looking at issues around power, including systems and relationships. Social workers must embrace the resistance to oppression, resist blaming the victim and face squarely the reality caused by isms in our society and power imbalances." (Saleebey, 2013, p. 183)

Assessment can be actively listening to what the client is asking, needing or wanting and meeting the client where they are with compassion and hope. It is the recognition of difference and being open to understand the other with a curiosity that invites a respectful exchange in order to provide best practice to those we serve.

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